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Brexit and the British Overseas Territories: Changing perspectives on security

Matthew C. Benwell and Alasdair Pinkerton

On 23 June 2016 citizens of the United Kingdom (and residents of the UK Overseas Territory of Gibraltar) voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. While the exact modes and timings of this exit remain unclear, the campaign was characterised by increasingly heated debate and sharply contrasting visions for Britain and its relationship with the wider world in the twenty-first century. A coterie of international politicians and world leaders waded into the debate, as a reminder of both the global interest in the referendum campaign and the potential international implications of the UK's decision – not least of all within the Overseas Territories (OTs) of the United Kingdom. Matthew Benwell and Alasdair Pinkerton argue that the UK's 2016 EU referendum campaign and the political and economic evaluations that it has invited have exposed a shifting relationship between the UK and its OTs and demonstrate the role played by the EU in fostering their political, economic and regional security – a perspective often ignored by the OT's so called 'friends' and supporters.

The run-up to the EU referendum witnessed wide-ranging debates concerning the UK's security profile on the international stage. One set of arguments attempted to mobilise an internationalist vision for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union – one that was largely predicated on the belief that, freed from the restrictions imposed by the EU, the UK would regain its place at the centre of an international trade network with its own former empire. One headline in The *Daily Telegraph* insisted that, 'Brexit will allow Britain to embrace the

Commonwealth’¹ – a view that was shared by a vocal coalition of ‘Commonwealth community leaders’ in the UK who declared their backing for ‘British exit from EU’.² The prominence of the Commonwealth during the referendum campaign pivoted on the fact that the EU prevents the UK from negotiating bilateral trading relationships with some of the world’s fastest growing economies, including Commonwealth members such as India. There was also a certain amount of speculation about what a changed relationship with Europe might mean for the governance of the UK’s fourteen OTs, particularly Gibraltar,³ and the implied risks to the military security of the Falkland Islands if Britain was to remain in the EU and be ‘sucked into a European Army’.⁴ Some parliamentarians delivered defiant messages in support of the defence capabilities of the UK’s armed forces, rejecting the claims of broader security provided to British OTs through the UK’s membership of the EU. For instance, speaking at the final evidence session of the Foreign Affairs Committee’s inquiry into the implications of the EU referendum, the chair of the Vote Leave campaign, Labour MP Gisela Stuart stated that: ‘The United Kingdom successfully defended the Falklands on its own. It has defended Gibraltar on its own. I don’t think that whether or not we are in the EU will affect that’.⁵ Far from resolving these questions related to defence of the OTs, however, the referendum result has introduced added layers of uncertainty, the implications of which may take many years to fully comprehend – a scenario not helped by the battle-hardening of positions on either side of the Leave-Remain divide.

Notwithstanding the sensationalist nature of some of these arguments, they are illustrative of the narrow ways in which the security of British OTs has been understood by many commentators and politicians in the UK. Over recent decades the security of British OTs has come to be framed in overwhelmingly militarist and strategic terms, and in ways that have struggled to look beyond past military campaigns such as the 1982 Falklands War.⁶ Despite

countervailing narratives from the Foreign Office and the OTs themselves of self-governance, self-determination and self-representation as the bedrock of security in the twenty-first century, there still seems to persist an overrepresentation of retired military commanders and ‘military sources’ in public discourse on the OTs. Major General Julian Thompson, commander of 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines in 1982, proclaimed that ‘The Falklands would be safer after Brexit’ during the weeks before the referendum, and was a prominent campaigner, alongside four other commanders from 1982, of the pro-Brexit ‘Veterans For Britain’ group.⁷ While this close association with the Falklands’ campaign served to add credibility and legitimacy to the arguments of Leave campaigners regarding the UK’s security interests, they bore little resemblance to the ways in which elected representatives and citizens of the OTs framed their own security. This is not a new phenomenon, but the EU referendum campaign has sharply exposed these shortcomings, revealing ongoing (mis)understandings of the OTs within the UK defence establishment. These events provide an important opportunity to critically rethink how the security of these territories might be framed in the future.

This article considers Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands and several other isolated British OTs to make a number of interrelated arguments about security within and beyond the framework of the EU. Firstly, using the case of Gibraltar, it shows how EU membership has afforded the territory economic security, as well as helping to control the actions of Spanish authorities at the border, and it reflects on the ways that politicians in Gibraltar have referred to the security derived from being a member of a larger collective like the EU. These references sometimes disrupt conventional understandings of the UK as the principal and sole provider of Gibraltar’s security requirements. Secondly, the article stresses the importance of incorporating the perspectives of representatives of British OTs in order to fully understand how they

conceptualise security. This underscores the need for a 'co-produced' framing of security for the Falklands and British OTs; one that encompasses the concerns of their representatives and citizens, as opposed to relying exclusively on statements from the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and geopolitical commentators prone to the use of abstract terminology such as 'strategic gateway'.⁸ The construction of the Falklands as a 'gateway', as somewhere to be strategically claimed and defended rather than somewhere to be lived in has the rhetorical effect of depopulating the Islands, playing directly into the hands of Argentina and their accusations of British imperialist ambition in the region. Finally, it is important to ensure that 'isolated' British OTs are not overlooked in debates about their own security, which have typically focussed on Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands. This has arguably had the effect of overemphasising the centrality of military security to the OTs, while deflecting attention away from the economic, diplomatic and human security advantages of their association with supranational organisations such as the EU.

Gibraltar

Gibraltar is unusual within the cohort of UK OTs as it is located within continental Europe and a member of the EU, with its citizens voting in EU elections as part of the South West England constituency. This makes Gibraltar somewhat different from the UK Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus, for example, which, although being located in Europe (and surrounded by the Republic of Cyprus – a full EU member state) are not recognised as part of the EU.⁹ The EU referendum, therefore, has arguably more serious potential implications for the economic and political security of Gibraltar relative to other British OTs. Gibraltar was also distinguished within the EU referendum process for being the only OT whose residents (so long as they

were UK, Irish and Commonwealth citizens) were granted the opportunity to vote on the UK's status within the EU. It was an issue that generated 'unprecedented unity' as political and civic leaders in Gibraltar unequivocally advocated the UK remaining in the EU, whilst its citizens seemingly snubbed pro-Brexit events and campaigners, including the Conservative MP and Chairman of the British Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies All Party Parliamentary Group's Andrew Rosindell.¹⁰ A statement released by the Government of Gibraltar in January 2016 confidently predicted that, 'the "overwhelming majority" of the people of Gibraltar, who are entitled to vote in the referendum, will vote to remain in the EU'.¹¹ They were right. Gibraltar was the first voting area to declare its result on 23-24 June, with more than 95 per cent of those eligible to vote electing to remain in the EU.

Throughout the campaign period, representatives of the Government of Gibraltar were quick to point to the economic benefits of having access to the European single market (which accounts for 45 per cent of Gibraltar's trade), most especially for the lucrative financial and online gaming industries. They cited the free movement of capital facilitated by Gibraltar's membership of the EU that enabled citizens in southern regions of Spain to move freely across the border, although these mobilities have been subjected to periodic disruption from Spanish authorities.¹² These border crossings were emphasised as essential to the viability of Gibraltar's economy, enabling daily access for workers, tourists and UK nationals living in the southern regions of Spain. Moreover, the European Commission had previously called on Spain to 'fully respect EU law' relating to freedom of movement, after it disrupted border crossings and threatened to impose a fee.¹³ Rather than seeing the EU as a threat to Gibraltar, the Chief Minister Fabien Picardo warned that Spanish politicians could 'pounce' and seize the opportunity to exert further diplomatic pressure on the territory, including disruption of border crossings, in the event of a vote to leave.¹⁴ The Foreign Affairs Committee report on

the 'Implications of the Referendum on EU Membership for the UK's Role in the World' acknowledged the Gibraltar government's concern that Spain would look to 'further undermine, isolate and exclude Gibraltar from the European mainstream'.¹⁵ While the concerns about Spanish sovereignty claims (and its subsequent diplomatic strategies) were not entirely unexpected given the recent history of tension,¹⁶ the ways Chief Minister Picardo referred to the collective security provided by the EU was, perhaps, more surprising: 'If we leave we will need to go back to the drawing board in some of the hard fought areas and we will rely on each successive UK government not sacrificing us to the expediency of its own political, economic and commercial interests and needs'.¹⁷

For the Gibraltar government the EU has emerged as a kind of 'guarantor' power, providing an additional level of institutional legitimacy and security for Gibraltar, and as a source of reassurance for its political and diplomatic consistency towards the Territory. Rather than assuming this works in tandem with diplomatic support from the UK government, Picardo's clear implication is that the EU provides a kind of security for Gibraltar that both transcends and mitigates political fluctuations at Westminster, the frequent 'churn' of Foreign Office ministers, and potential shifts in UK government foreign policy priorities.

Gaining the formal recognition of supranational organisations like the EU is fundamental for British OTs more broadly, and particularly those subject to sovereignty disputes, such as Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands. Their collective association with the EU assures British OTs consistent institutional support from an organisation whose individual member states (including Spain and Italy) have not always been supportive of their sovereignty claims.¹⁸ For small OTs with limited diplomatic budgets and capacities, this bloc support cuts down on the financial costs, time and diplomatic labour required to develop and sustain bilateral support.

The support garnered from the EU is even more critical when considering the rather more unfriendly reception British OT delegations have received at the United Nations in New York. The UN Special Committee on Decolonisation (C24) has been an especially hostile and ineffective forum, and provides a sharp contrast with the EU, which has, for example, deployed inspectors to uphold freedom of movement policy along the Spanish-Gibraltar border.¹⁹

Finally, the uncertainty that representatives of Gibraltar's government feared would characterise the immediate aftermath of the referendum are not insignificant. The governments of OTs that are subject to competing sovereignty claims are required to deal with dynamic diplomatic scenarios that feature hostile administrations looking to capitalise on any eventuality that might further their respective territorial ambitions. These relatively small British OT governments were especially mindful of any short-term attempts to question the viability and legitimacy of British OTs by unfriendly and considerably larger neighbours. Speaking within a few hours of the referendum result, José Manuel García-Margallo, the Spanish foreign minister, proclaimed, 'a complete change of outlook that opens up new possibilities on Gibraltar not seen for a very long time. I hope the formula of co-sovereignty - to be clear, the Spanish flag on the Rock - is much closer than before.'²⁰

The Falkland Islands

The Falkland Islands are, alongside Gibraltar, perhaps the most prominent of the UK OTs within the political consciousness of the UK public – a position established during and after the 1982 conflict and one that continues to be routinely cemented by the ongoing sovereignty dispute with Argentina. The status of the Falkland Islands is, perhaps unlike anywhere else in

the UK or overseas, bound up with debates over the security of the United Kingdom and the operational effectiveness of its armed forces. It has become a commonplace convention over the years since 1982 for the tabloid and broadsheet press in the UK to question the state of the UK armed forces by asking: ‘could Britain reclaim the Falklands today?’ It is equally commonplace for retired military commanders, many with personal connections to the planning and execution of the British campaign in 1982, to be sought out to provide their assessment in response.²¹ While these may be legitimate questions, and while the respondents may be well qualified to provide their opinions, the effect of these successive ‘military panics’ has been, firstly, to cast the Falkland Islands as a strategic space that is made meaningful almost solely in relation to the operational capacities of the UK armed forces and, secondly, to frame discussions of the ‘security’ of the Falklands and Falkland Islanders as both exogenous to the Islands (that is to say, as something residing within the UK) and for ‘security’ to be considered almost exclusively in military terms.²² In the aftermath of the EU referendum, a reassessment of these long-held narratives is possible by drawing critical attention to the ‘more than military’ dimensions of Falkland Islands security, the status of its domestic economy, and to institutions – including the EU – that are playing a critical, if largely unacknowledged, part in the ‘security’ of the Falklands in the early twenty-first century.

The Falkland Islands have emerged since 1982 as a vibrant, self-governing and self-determining democracy. The Islands’ economy has also undergone a radical transformation. From a position in the early 1980s where sheep farming predominated and the economic viability of the islands was in serious doubt,²³ the Falkland Islands have become, in subsequent years, a comparatively wealthy and vibrant community and economy. The GDP of the Falkland Islands economy was £198 million in 2012, with a six-year average (from 2007–2012) of £148.8 million.²⁴ While this is high by international standards when considered on a

per capita basis (in 2012, for example, this equated to £77,000 per capita), it should be noted that the Falkland Islands economy is relatively small and faces ‘chronic challenges’ that are typical to small and remote economies, including issues related to the maintenance of transport links with the rest of the world (in the face of locational, meteorological, logistical and political obstacles), a dependence on the export of comparatively few commodities, and a vulnerability to fluctuations in their world market prices.²⁵ Many of these challenges were identified in 1976 with the publication of a British Government report into the future of the Falklands, the ability of the Islands to sustain themselves, and their future economic potential. Drawing on the recommendations of the so called Shackleton Report,²⁶ the post-1982 Falklands economy diversified away from wool production to include, for example, the creation of a commercial fishing industry within a clearly delineated Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone (now the Falkland Islands Outer Conservation Zone). Today, fishing and aquaculture is the single largest contributor to the Falklands economy (34.1 per cent of GDP), followed by hydrocarbon industries which contributed 24.3 per cent.²⁷

A large part of the Falkland Islands’ recent economic prosperity can be attributed to the UK’s membership of the European Union. The Falkland Islands Government estimates that the total sales of fish, meat and other agricultural products produced in the Falklands to the European Union is valued at £180million per annum, meaning that the EU is the largest single market for Falklands products globally, accounting for 70 per cent of total GDP (for example, EU Member States such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Croatia account for a sizeable proportion of fish exports from the Falklands). This success, despite the vast geographical distance from the Falklands to the EU, is largely predicated on the ‘pull factor’ of quota- and tariff-free access to the European single market made available to the Falkland Islands as a UK Overseas Territory and as a member of the EU’s OCT (Overseas Countries and Territories).

For instance, the Overseas Association Decision adopted by the EU in 2013, has meant that fishing vessels flying the flags of EU member states are able to operate in the Falklands, facilitating the export of fish to the European market.²⁸ Any restrictions to this market access would be, according to the Falklands Islands Government, 'potentially catastrophic' to the current economy and future development of the Falkland Islands.

While British withdrawal from the European Union was represented as posing a tangible, even 'catastrophic' risk to the economic security of the Falkland Islands, it would have also brought to an end the Falkland Islands participation in an important international forum at a time when the Falklands required as much international recognition and diplomatic currency as it could generate.²⁹ Reflecting on the prospect of the UK leaving the EU, the nominated spokesperson for the Falkland Islands Legislative Assembly, Michael Poole MLA, observed:

One of the things uppermost in our minds is the potential political implications of this. Clearly with the Argentine claim and that situation, our connection to Europe is quite helpful and we find that the European Commission is actually properly neutral on this issue and just treats us as they would any other OT and any other government, which has been quite helpful because whilst individual countries in Europe may not always be as supportive as we'd hope, the European Commission and Brussels have been quite supportive It's nice to have that support there.³⁰

The former Foreign Secretary William Hague went further when, writing in *The Daily Telegraph* in May 2016, he highlighted the danger of sacrificing the 'guaranteed solidarity' currently provided by all 28 EU member states on the issue of British sovereignty over the Islands.³¹ Any change in this unanimity (for instance, if the obligations to the UK in European treaties were removed), Hague argued, and 'a future troublesome [Argentine] president will

sense the chance to be bolder'.³² Much of Argentina's recent 'boldness' has, itself, been a product of regional bloc politics. Since its formation in 2004, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) has repeatedly backed Argentina's claim to 'Las Malvinas' and has more recently imposed restrictions and sanctions on Falkland Islands industries and occasional blockades of Falkland Islands flagged shipping, limiting the Islands' capacity to trade with its nearest geographical neighbours. These assertive actions have posed a deliberate challenge to the security of the Falklands, albeit not in ways that would warrant or necessitate a military response by the UK armed forces. Instead, Argentina (working with UNASUR) have sought to challenge the economic, food, and human security of the Falkland Islands as a sustainable and self-governing territory, and in so doing have driven the Islands into a closer and more dependent relationship with the EU. The hostility that the Falkland Islands has experienced at the hands of regional groupings like UNASUR and in subcommittees of the UN perhaps explains why the EU's relative 'neutrality' as a trading bloc, discussion forum and diplomatic broker, is nonetheless valued by the governments of the Falklands and Gibraltar alike.

While the security challenges are experienced by Falkland Islanders on a daily basis, and while the importance of the Islands' relationship with the EU was clearly articulated in parliamentary committees and reported in the UK media during the EU referendum campaign, the response by certain quarters of the UK press – ordinarily friendly to the concerns and interests of Falkland Islanders – was telling. The *Daily Express*, for instance, condemned William Hague as 'gutless and defeatist' and his words as 'incendiary' for highlighting the economic and diplomatic advantages of the EU to the Falkland Islands.³³ Former Defence Secretary Liam Fox, on the other hand, dismissed the concerns of Falkland Islanders out of hand, describing the EU's role in Falkland Islands security as 'an irrelevance' while appealing to the legacy of the unilateral UK military campaign to recapture the Falklands

in 1982.³⁴ In the aftermath of the UK's decision to leave the EU, as the security and defence implications of the decision become clearer, it is critical that the more nuanced and 'indigenous' understanding of Falkland Islands security brought to the surface during the referendum process should not only remain, but increasingly influence the UK's South Atlantic security framework.

'Isolated' British OTs

The respective geopolitical challenges faced by the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar mean they receive the most attention when the security of British OTs is discussed. This should not, however, detract from considerations of the security of other British OTs, some of which are geographically isolated with communities of only a few hundred people. Arguably, it is these OTs that are even more vulnerable to, for instance, natural disasters and their lasting economic and societal impacts. The EU provides ongoing post-disaster reconstruction assistance to British OTs such as Monserrat (€34.06 million from 2008–2020),³⁵ offering another tranche of financial and institutional support beyond the £400m provided by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) between 1997-2015.³⁶ Furthermore, the EU has played a significant economic role in many Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) through the allocation of various iterations of the European Development Fund (EDF). For isolated British OTs like the Pitcairn Islands and St Helena, these funds have made possible improvements to landing facilities for cruise ships to facilitate growth and future sustainability in the tourist sector, a vital source of income and economic security for these communities. The 9th and 10th iterations of the EDF provided the Cayman Islands (€7 million) and the Turks and Caicos Islands (€6.25 million) respectively, with financial assistance towards

reconstruction in the wake of severe weather events, as well as funding for disaster risk prevention. Substantial EU funding has also been allocated to facilitate sustainable development, strengthen environmental conservation and the preservation of biodiversity in various British OTs, including those situated in the Caribbean.³⁷

Being associated with a supranational body like the EU has also guaranteed small and isolated territories a level of diplomatic and international recognition that should not be underestimated. So, for example, the EU-OCT Association is a forum for broad-based dialogue that is convened by the European Commission, providing the institutional framework for consultation between EU Member States and the OCTs. Membership of the Association of the Overseas Countries and Territories of the European Union (OCTA) has also given its members (consisting of British, French and Dutch OTs, together with Greenland) a forum to discuss shared challenges facing OCTs. Indeed, the OCTA Interim Strategic Plan 2015–2020 states that on the topics of ‘climate change, cooperation funding and trade liberalisation ... OCTs are mostly absent from global debates’.³⁸ It posits the promotion of ‘political partnerships’ on three different levels to improve the chances of OCTs being heard and to enable access to additional streams of funding. These comprise partnerships with the EU that can facilitate OCTs access to international organisations like the WTO; partnerships with the OCTs’ member states; and partnerships with ‘like-minded groups’ or organisations/territories that share similar structural handicaps and face the same development challenges.³⁹ It is hard to imagine how OCTs would go about getting their voices heard on the international stage without such collective co-operation. This is not to suggest that the relationship with the EU is always straightforward to administer, particularly for smaller OTs with limited governmental infrastructure and administrative capacity. As was noted in a report published just days before the referendum, the EU’s ‘bureaucratic processes’ and the ‘capacity constraints in some

UKOTs' work together to interfere with the timely and judicious utilisation of EU funding. It can also take a long time to navigate the bureaucratic processes required to access the EU's tariff- and quota- free markets, as evidenced by the multi-year negotiations required before the isolated OT of Tristan da Cunha was able to export its native rock lobster into the EU single market.⁴⁰ Despite the temptation, then, discussions of security and British OTs must not be limited to those territories considered to be strategically significant or under threat from hostile neighbours. This risks reproducing narrow conceptualisations of security shown above, as well as overlooking the broadly conceived security that is gained from British OTs being associated with an influential supranational bloc like the EU.

Conclusion

The 2012 UK government Overseas Territories White Paper was a critically important and progressive vision for the 'Security, Success and Sustainability' of the OTs. As well as recommitting the UK government to the defence of the OTs for the purpose of 'ensur[ing] that *our* sovereignty over the Territories is defended against all challenges', it also acknowledged that defence and security strategy must enable OTs 'to trade, to exploit *their* natural resources and to develop *their* economies free from undue external interference'.⁴¹ It also served to highlight contemporary priorities of the OTs as self-determining communities, chiefly 'resilient economies', 'cherishing the environment', 'vibrant and flourishing communities', and making 'productive links with the wider world'. While this document reflects the 2010–2014 Coalition government's progressive vision for the security and sustainability of the territories, citizens of the OTs with memories that stretch back to 2002 (when the Blair government engineered secret talks with Spain over 'joint sovereignty'

of Gibraltar) or to 1980 (when the Thatcher government pursued a 'lease-back' arrangement of the Falkland Islands with Argentina) can recall moments in history of considerable insecurity – when British diplomatic and military support was far from guaranteed.

The recent EU referendum campaign exposed deep and uncomfortable fissures in popular and elite narratives about the security and sovereignty of the UK's Overseas Territories. Whereas current UK policy towards the OTs has sought to support the territories in the pursuit of being self-governing, self-determining and self-representing, the EU referendum campaign revealed that, for many (including self-declared 'friends' of the OTs), this should be a self-representation *within limits*. It is telling to reflect on the voices that were afforded authority to talk about the security of British OTs in the run-up to the referendum, those that were largely overlooked, and those that were dismissed and/or publically undermined. While distinguished ex-military officers and former defence ministers offered informed and impassioned arguments about the security of OTs, many drew on narrow conceptions of security that were often at odds with the perspectives of the people and politicians from these territories. When they were given a platform to reflect on the EU referendum, the voices of the British OTs invoked a much broader definition of security that corresponded to their contemporary needs, anxieties and everyday lives, and in ways that rarely dwelled on the militaristic evocations of past conflicts. They routinely expressed their support for the EU in ways that not only failed to persuade their UK-based 'friends' but which also seemed to provoke dismay, irritation and somewhat hostile ripostes from those same 'friends' in the UK media.

Realigning understandings of security could, additionally, help make room for the consideration of other 'isolated' OTs that are not necessarily defined by their 'strategic'

location or directly threatened by hostile neighbouring states. Citizens of British OTs are today only too aware of the necessary reassurance provided by the presence of the UK armed forces for their continued security, yet they have repeatedly identified the economic, diplomatic and regional security dividends offered by their association with the European Union. As the UK moves towards negotiations for leaving the EU, efforts should be made to establish more holistic, 'co-produced' understandings of security for British OTs that reflect the lives and livelihoods of their diverse communities.

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³⁵ European Commission, 'International Cooperation and Development: Montserrat', <https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/countries/montserrat_en>, accessed 10 May 2016.

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³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Peter Clegg, 'The United Kingdom Overseas Territories'.

⁴¹ Foreign Office, 'The Overseas Territories: Security, Success and Sustainability', Cm 8374 (London: The Stationery Office, June 2012), p. 22, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/12249/ot-wp-0612.pdf, accessed 12 May 2016; emphasis added.